Duruthu: Remembering a visit by the Buddha

Posted on



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” … Lanka was known to the Conqueror as a place where his doctrine should shine in glory … ” (Mahavamsa: 1: 20)

Long has this belief been held by Lanka’s people: that the Buddha looked down from the mythical lake Anotatta in the Himalayas at the fullmoon of the ancient Indian lunar month of Phussa (December/January) and decided ” to set forth for the isle of Lanka, to win Lanka for the faith.” What he had seen also was an island at that time filled with ignorant and warlike creatures, described as ‘Yakkhas ‘ or demons by the Chronicler many, many centuries later, and the Buddha by the merit of his supernormal powers acquired at his Enlightenment, desired the land of these subversive beings and prepare it as a fitting repository for his Doctrine. He did.

The event is celebrated year after year in Kelaniya, a suburb north of Colombo, on the West Coast, where the Kelani (Kalyani) river flows to the sea as it has done from times immemorial. The first of three visits of the Buddha to Lanka was believed to have been made in the month of December/January, at the full moon of ” Duruthu ” and it was not to Kelaniya but to Mahiyangana in the south-eastern mountain ranges that he came; to the groves where the ‘ Yakkhas ‘ lived and worshipped their nature gods. It was there he worked some mighty miracles and transferred them to a ” pleasant ” place: the Giridipa which it is believed is to free the extreme hinterland of the central mountainous zone.

The “Duruthu Festival ” commemorating this visit of the Buddha is celebrated islandwide and in Mahiyangana as well; but nowhere with such pomp and traditional pageantiy as in Kelaniya. But the Buddha visited Kelaniya too: on his third and last visit to lanka, and at that time it was a rich and fair city where a Naga King ruled in majestic splendour. King Maniakkhika of Kelaniya had already met the Buddha; had been the humble recipient of his concern when the Master undertook to vist Nagadipa in the north western region of Lanka and settled a quarrel between two of his (Maniakkhika’s) relatives, the Naga kings Mahodara and Chulodara who both vied in battle to possess a splendid gemset throne. King Maniakkhika of Kelaniya was not directly involved but as a relative of the warring monarchs would have been forced to enter the lists on one side or the other. It was with deep thankfulness therefore that he addressed the Buddha: ” Great is the compassion that thou hast shown us here, 0 Master ! Hadst thou not appeared we had all been consumed to ashes. May thy compassion yet light also especially on me, 0 thou who art rich in loving kindness, in that thou shalt come yet again hither to my dwelling-country, 0 thou peerless one. ”

According to the tradition enshrined in the Mahavamsa Chronicle the Buddha’s visit to Nagadipa to settle the quarrel over ownership of the throne between the uncle Mahodara and the nephew Culodara was in the fifth year of his Enlightenment. The visit to Kelaniya on the invitation of the pious Maniakkhika was in the eighth year of Siddharta Gautama’s Buddhahood and it was indeed a memorable one. All these , • its are commemorated in the magnificent festival held year after year in Kelaniya, whose famous and hallowed temple is believed to antedate many other shrines in the country. If legend is to be believed-and time and time again in history legend has been proved to encapsule truth – the Buddha himself brought Buddhism co the Naga tribes who inhabited the north western southern coastal regions of the island in the 6th century B.C

Archaeologists have proved that Kelaniya is one of the earliest human settlements in the island. It could well have been a vast city at that time, and it was indeed a fine town in later centuries, beautifully laid out and be-decked not only during the Perahera. The ancient fane has been re-built several times after the hands of vandals destroyed it during invasions from the southern kingdoms of India; during the Portuguese invasion in the 16th century of our era, and at diverse times when it became the target of rebel forces and was occupied and desecrated. But both prose and poetry tell of its days of grandeur.

It is specially sanctified as a Buddhist shrine because immured in its relic chamber is the very robe so its said Lord Buddha wore when he bathed in the Kelani River before partaking of the royal hospitality offered to him by King Maniakkhila. The gem set throne is also enshrined in the relic chamber of the dagoba. It was gifted to Lord Buddha by the warring princes after the Buddha had preached to them and peace had been declared in the land. Excavations undertaken in modern times reveal very ancient remains of buildings and several ancient inscriptions which testify to these treasured relics having been placed inside this venerated chaitya.

Kelaniya is also associated with Lanka’s, peerless heroine, Queen Vihara Maha Devi, whose father ruled the principality in the 2nd century B.C. Due to an evil on his part his daughter was sent out in a gilded boat on the stormy and turbulent ocean as a sacrifice to the sea-god. The Devas (good spirits) however protected her and brought her safely to the southern Kingdom of Ruhuna where its ruler, King Kavantissa welcomed and wedded her. She was the mother of one of Lanka’s greatest kings, Dutugemunu, who built the great Buddhist edifices yet to be seen in Anuradhapura.

In the 14th and 15th centuries Kelaniya reached almost the peak of its glory. The capital of Lanka was then situated in Kotte, six miles from Colombo harbour and Kelaniya itself was an important port-city where merchants made their abode. Much of the trade in gems, timber, elephants and spices was conducted there, brought the Kelani river which flowed into the sea below the ancient stupa and its temple. Surrounding the temple area were the craft villages, some of which can be visited today and the art of pottery making, particularly, had reached a very high standard here.

The biggest festival at Kelaniya is the Duruthu Perahera, which takes place during the period of the full moon in the month of January, and is a most splendid sight. Peraheras, or ritual or ceremonial processions, are common in Sri Lanka, and form

part of most ceremonial occasions, both lay and religious. The peraheras associated with the Buddhist religion are very colourful events and awaited with great enthusiasm by the people of an area. If would not be wrong to say there is a perahera of some son in a temple, in some part of Sri Lanka, every day. Of these there are a few that are accepted as unusual spectacles of colour and pageantry, with their fame spread throughout the country. It is to this latter category that the Kelaniya Duruthu Perahera belongs. The Perahera takes weeks of preparation, with the people who live in the vicinity of the temple, and others for miles around, participating in the arrangements. There are the roads to be cleaned, repaired and lit up, special stalls to be erected, viewing galleries to be set up, and special places to be set apart for the bathing and feeding of elephants. As the Perahera day approaches the temple precincts take on a carnival air, with hundreds of little stalls selling flowers and joss sticks, camphor and coconut oil, for offerings at the temple.

Thousands of devotees, mostly clad in white come to the temple on the full moon (Poya) day, to worship at the great statue of the reclining Buddha within, and view the beautiful frescoes depicting important events in the life of the Buddha, incidents from Buddhist legend and lore, and the history of Buddhism and its spread in Sri Lanka, which adorn the temple walls.

As the light of the full moon begins to dispel the dark, large crowds begin to line the streets, all round the temple square and its precincts, awaiting in eager anticipation the great Perahera.

They await expecting to be awed by the majesty and grace of scores of elephants, all richly caparisoned, with bells tinkling, and some with tusks encased in bejewelled sheaths. There is the cynosure, the Temple Elephant which carries the sacred relics of the Temple, placed on its back by the chief lay benefactors of the temple (the dayakas). It will walk in the Perahera escorted by two other elephants, and its path will strewn with jasmines, while its arrival is announced by drums and conch blowers.

Many groups of dancers, numbering in all over five hundred, would pass by stepping to the rhythm of traditional drums. Dancers from the South, to the deep sound of drums used in exorcise rituals, some combining the skills of dancing with acrobatics and juggling, and the famous Kandyan Dancers of Sri Lanka, stepping to the beat of the Magul Bera (ceremonial drums) with the silver head-dress, beaded vests, and pleated and flared skirt like dress.

The crowds, and specially the children, will thrill to the sight of performing clowns, fire-dancers, and masked dancers, some dressed up as bears, lions and leopards. All this in the light of burning torches and petromax lamps carried by temple retainers, and that of thousands of tiny electric jets which adorn the temple and the buildings around it. The Duruthu Perahera, with its elephants, drummers, dancers and jugglers and temple chieftains wends its way through the streets well into the night, until it returns to the temple, with the sound of drums and oboes, and the cries of Sadhu, Sadhu (hail and praise) filling the air for miles around.



Traditional dancers performing in the colourful pageant of the Duruthu Perahera at Kelaniya.
(Sure sh de Silva)